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TREES AND PLANTS IN THE GREEK TRAGIC WRITERS

By EDWARD S. FORSTER

IT was not until the time of Aristotle and his pupil Theophrastus that the Greeks took the initiative in studying botany from a scientific point of view, but naturally earlier Greek writers were interested in varying degrees and for various reasons in the plants which they saw around them, and therefore mention them in their works.

The present is the third of a series of articles, the first two of which have appeared in the *Classical Review*, 'Trees and Plants in Homer'¹ (*C.R.*, vol. I, July 1936, pp. 97 ff.) and 'Trees and Plants in Herodotus' (*ib.*, vol. lvi, July 1942, pp. 57 ff.). The present article deals with the references to trees and plants in the thirty-five extant plays and fragments of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.² It is proposed first to tabulate the references to trees, shrubs, and plants in these authors and indicate the contexts in which they occur, and then to try to draw some conclusions as to the interest which these writers display in plant life and the attitude which they adopt towards it. Forty-three botanical names occur in the plays of the three dramatists, whereas in Homer there are fifty and in Herodotus fifty-seven. It will be clear, I think, that the dramatists took much less interest in plant-life than either Homer or Herodotus.

To take trees and shrubs first, the oak, ἀρκύς (*Quercus robur*)—a word which, like the Sanskrit root *dru*, was originally a general term for 'tree' or 'wood', and hence is used for the 'king of trees'—occurs frequently in the Greek tragedians, especially in Euripides. Its wood is used for a funeral pyre in *S. Tr.* 1195, for a sacrificial fire in *E. Bacch.* 766, and for ordinary fuel in *ib.* 384 and 615, and for making garlands (*ib.* 702). It occurs in similes of a stricken warrior, who falls like a felled oak (*S. El.* 98), and of a mother clinging to her child 'like ivy to an oak' (*E. Hec.* 398). It is twice used of the 'talking' oaks of Dodona (*A. P.V.* 834, *S. Tr.* 1168), but the more correct word in this connexion is φηγός

¹ This article contains a short general introduction to the subject of botany in Greek authors.

² The Oxford texts have been used for the plays. The fragments of Aeschylus are quoted from Nauck's *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, those of Sophocles from Jebb and Pearson's *Fragments of Sophocles*, and those of Euripides from Nauck's *Euripidis Tragoediae*, vol. iii (Teubner). A. S. Hunt's *Fragmenta Tragica Papyracea* has also been consulted.

(*Quercus aegilops*), the Valonia oak (S. *Tr.* 171, E. *Melanippe*, 21 *Frag. Trag. Papyr.*). φηγός does not occur in the tragic writers except with reference to Dodona.

The willow, ἰτέα (*Salix alba*), is only found in Euripides and in the sense of a wicker shield (*Heracleid.* 376, *Suppl.* 695).

The black poplar, αἴγειρος (*Populus niger*), occurs in E. *Hipp.* 210, where Phaedra expresses a wish that she could repose in its shade, and in two similes in Sophocles, 'even as when the breeze is so light as to stir nothing save the top of the poplar' (*Fr.* 23) and *ib.* 593, where man is said to be as 'shortlived as the leaves of a slender poplar'.

The Corsican pine, πεύκη (*Pinus laricio*), is frequently mentioned. It grew on Mount Ida (E. *Hipp.* 1254) and on Mount Pelion (*Alc.* 918); it was used for signal fires and torches (A. *Ag.* 279; S. *Tr.* 1198, etc.) and for building ships (E. *Med.* 4, *Andr.* 864).

The Aleppo pine, πίτυς (*Pinus halepensis*), occurs only in A. *Fr.* 251, where a warrior hangs his bow on a branch of it.

The silver pine, ἐλάτη (*Abies cephalonica*), is mentioned several times by Euripides but not in the other two tragedians. It occurs eleven times in E. *Bacch.*, mainly in the scene described by the messenger (ll. 1043–153), which took place on the pine-clad heights of Mount Cithaeron. Since pine-wood was used in the construction of ships, ἐλάτη is used for a ship (E. *Phoen.* 208, *Alc.* 444).

The prickly cedar, κέδρος (*Juniperus oxycedrus*), occurs several times in Euripides, its wood being used in building (*Tro.* 1141, *Alc.* 158, *Or.* 1371), for making a coffin (*Alc.* 365) and a staircase (*Phoen.* 100).

The bay-tree, δάφνη (*Laurus nobilis*), is mentioned frequently by Euripides, but not by Aeschylus and only once by Sophocles. It grew in the sacred grove at Delos (E. *Hec.* 459), and it was beneath a bay-tree that Cassandra prophesied (*Andr.* 1115); boughs of it were carried in processions in honour of Apollo (*Ion* 422) and it was used for decking his temple (*ib.* 80, 103). It was used for garlands (*I.A.* 897) and for making brooms (*Ion* 145). It occurs in a simile of ivy clinging to a bay-tree (*Med.* 1213). In S. *Fr.* 897 'having eaten of the bay-leaf keep your mouth tightly closed' seems to mean 'when inspired keep a guard on your utterance', referring to the fact that the priestess of Apollo chewed bay-leaves before uttering her oracles.

The frankincense tree, λίβανος (*Boswellia Carterii*), is mentioned in E. *Bacch.* 144 as used in religious ceremonies. It occurs also as a single word in S. *Fr.* 1064.

The manna-ash, μελίη (*Fraxinus ornus*), occurs in S. *Fr.* 759, where

it is coupled with καρύα, the hazel-tree (*Corylus avellana*); the context is not supplied.

The cornel-tree, κράνεια (*Cornus mas*), is mentioned in E. *Fr.* 785 as a material for arrows. It is akin to, but much larger than, our dog-wood (*Cornus sanguinea*).

The Greek λωτός has several meanings, but in the tragedians it is only used of the nettle-tree (*Celtis australis*), of which the stems were often used for pipes: hence the word comes to mean 'a flute' (E. *El.* 716, *Hel.* 171). The other meanings are (a) the jujube-tree (*Zizyphus lotus*), the food of the lotus-eaters, (b) a leguminous plant, identical with, or akin to, bird's-foot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), and (c) *Nymphaea lotus* or Nile water-lily. The verb λωτίζομαι, 'pick out the choicest flower', is found in A. *Suppl.* 963 and S. *Fr.* 724, and the substantive λώτισμα, 'flower', is used in a metaphorical sense (like άνθος and άωτος) in A. *Fr.* 99, 17^a and E. *Hel.* 1593.

The chaste-tree, λύγος (*Vitex agnus castus*), occurs in E. *Cycl.* 225; its twigs were used by the Cyclops for binding his lambs together. It is used in the weaving of baskets by the modern Greeks.

The myrtle, μυρσίνη (*Myrtus communis*), occurs only in Euripides (*Alc.* 749; *El.* 324, 512, 778; *Ion* 120). It was used for garlands and for decking tombs.

The tree-heath, έρείκη (*Erica arborea*), occurs in A. *Ag.* 286, where it is used for fuel for the beacon-fire. It grows to a height of 10 or 12 feet and is still used for fuel in the Argolid.

The gum of the myrrh-tree (*Balsamodendron myrrha*), which grew in Arabia, was used as incense (S. *Fr.* 181, 370; E. *Ion* 1175).

Of fruit-trees the olive and vine occur most frequently. The olive-tree, έλαία (*Olea europaea*), is mentioned as growing at Colonus (S. *O.C.* 17, 701) and at Samos (A. *Pers.* 883). The fruit is mentioned in ib. 617. It was the gift of Athena (E. *Tro.* 802) and was used in sacrifices (S. *Fr.* 398); its boughs were carried by suppliants (A. *Eum.* 43; S. *O.C.* 483) and by a herald (A. *Ag.* 494), and its foliage was used for garlands (E. *Ion* 1433). It was a stake of olive-wood burnt in the fire which Odysseus used for blinding the Cyclops (E. *Cycl.* 455 ff.).

The wild olive, έλαιος, is mentioned in S. *Tr.* 1197, where Heracles commands Hylas to use its wood as one of the constituents of his funeral pyre.

The grape-vine, άμπελος (*Vitis vinifera*), occurs very frequently, usually in connexion with wine used for drinking or libation. A more poetical word for the vine is οινάνθη, which is found in S. *Fr.* 255 and

E. *Phoen.* 231. The former passage describes the miraculous growth of a bunch of grapes in a single day.

The date-palm, φοῖνιξ (*Phoenix dactylifera*), is mentioned only in E. *Hec.* 458, where the reference is to the tree at Delos under which Leto gave birth to Apollo and Artemis. It is curious that the only mention of the date-palm in Homer (*Od.* vi. 163) also refers to this tree at Delos, to which Odysseus compares Nausicaa. The date-palm, as its name implies, came from the East and was not a native of Greece.

The cultivated fig-tree is not mentioned by the tragedians, but the wild fig, ἐρινός (*Ficus caprificus*), occurs in S. *Fr.* 181, a proverbial saying quoted by Athenaeus, 'a ripe wild-fig, useless for eating, you try to fertilize others by your instruction'; that is to say, 'Being ignorant, how can you instruct others?' The adjective ἐρίνεος occurs in E. *Fr.* 676.

Similarly the cultivated pear does not occur, but the wild pear, ἄχερδος (*Pyrus amygdoliformis*), is used in S. *O.C.* 1596 of a hollow tree near the scene of Oedipus' miraculous disappearance.

The mulberry, μόνον (*Morus nigra*), occurs in S. *Fr.* 395, where the blossom is said to be white, the fruit first purple and then black, when 'Egyptian' (= black) old age comes upon it. In A. *Fr.* 116 berries, white, red, and black, are said to appear on the μόνον at the same time: hence Liddell and Scott suggest that here the bramble, βάτος (*Rubus ulmifolia*), is referred to, which seems unlikely.

The apple, μήλον (*Pyrus malus*), is used in S. *Tr.* 1102 of the golden apples of the Hesperides, which forms the object of one of the labours of Heracles. The adjectives μηλόσπορος (E. *Hipp.* 742) and μηλοφόρος (E. *H.F.* 396) both occur in passages also referring to the apples of the Hesperides.

The pomegranate, ρόα (*Punica granatum*), occurs in A. *Fr.* 610, a quotation by Aristophanes. It is probably a proverbial saying, used of unnecessary toil, 'Thou wilt be picking seeds from a bitter-sweet pomegranate'.

Only three cereals are mentioned in the Tragedians, barley, wheat, and millet. Barley, κρίθη (*Hordeum sativum*), occurs in A. *Suppl.* 953, where ἐκ κριθῶν μέθυ is a drink of the nature of beer. The verb κριθάω, 'feed on barley', 'wax wanton' (used of horses or asses), is found in A. *Ag.* 1641 and S. *Fr.* 876.

Wheat, πυρός (*Triticum vulgare*), is found only in adjective forms, πυροφόρος (E. *Phoen.* 664) and πύρινος (E. *Fr.* 373).

Italian millet, μελίνη (*Setaria Italica*), occurs in the curious phrase κνήμη μελίνης (S. *Fr.* 608) quoted by Harpocration; according to Theo-

phrastus (*Hist. plant.* ix. 13. 5) it means the space between two knots on the stalk or else the long, rounded ear of the millet. Another kind of millet, κέγχρος (*Panicum miliaceum*), does not occur in the Tragedians, but κέγχρωματτα 'grains of millet' are used of the eyelet-holes on the rim of a shield in E. *Phoen.* 1386.

πόα is the general term for grass, particularly as used for fodder (S. *Aj.* 601, *O.C.* 157; E. *Cycl.* 333). It also has the still more general significance of 'herb', and in A. *Fr.* 28, 29 is used of the magical herb which Glaucus ate and was transformed into a sea-god.

Of plants used for textiles λίνον, flax (*Linum usitatissimum*), occurs frequently. It was employed for making thread (E. *Tro.* 537, *Or.* 1431), cloths or garments (A. *Suppl.* 121), fishing-nets (A. *Cho.* 504), and sails (E. *I.T.* 410). Another word for flax is βύσσος, the adjectival form of which is a common epithet of garments (A. *Sept.* 1039, *Pers.* 123; S. *Fr.* 373; E. *Bacch.* 821).

Hemp, κάνναβις (*Cannabis sativa*), is quoted as a single word from the *Thamyras* of Sophocles (S. *Fr.* 243). The scene of this play was Thrace, and, since Herodotus (iv. 74) tells us that the Thracians wore hempen garments, the reference is probably to these.

Papyrus, βύβλος (*Cyperus papyrus*), occurs as the name of a plant in the Tragedians only in A. *Suppl.* 761 in a proverbial saying βύβλου δὲ καρπὸς οὐ κρατεῖ στάχυν, 'the papyrus fruit does not always come to maturity', that is, 'don't count your chickens before they are hatched'. In ib. 947 it is used of a roll of papyrus.

Of reeds and rushes, κάλαμος is a general term which in the Tragedians is only used of musical instruments, especially Pan-pipes, made with reeds (E. *I.T.* 1126, *El.* 702, *I.A.* 577). In S. *Fr.* 36 it is used of the cross-reed of a lyre to which the lower ends of the strings were fastened.

σχοῖνος is also a general term for reed or rush. The adjective σχοίνινος is found in E. *Cycl.* 208 as an epithet of vessels woven of rushes for holding cheeses, and in E. *Fr.* 284 of horses' reins.

The pole-reed, δόναξ (*Arundo donax*), is used in its literal sense in E. *Hel.* 349, where it is described as growing in the river Eurotas, but it is more often used of flutes made of reeds (A. *P.V.* 575; E. *Or.* 146).

Of vegetables, κύαμος, the bean (*Vicia faba*), occurs only in S. *Fr.* 404, in the sense of a bean used for voting.

The globe-artichoke, κύναρα (*Cynara scolymus*), is quoted as a single word by Herodian (S. *Fr.* 348). In ib. 718 (κύναρὸς ἀκανθα πάντα πληθύνει γῆν) the artichoke is probably also meant, κύναρὸς being used as an adjective of two terminations and ἀκανθα in the general sense of a prickly plant; but possibly the text is corrupt. Eustathius is probably

wrong in thinking that κύναρος ἄκανθα is equivalent to κυνόςβατος dog-thorn (*Rosa sempervirens*).

Of plants appreciated for their flowers the rose, ῥόδον, is not mentioned, but Euripides uses the adjectives ῥόδεος and ῥοδόεις (*Med.* 841, *I.A.* 1297).

The hyacinth, ὑάκινθος (*Scilla bifolia*), occurs in *E. I.A.* 1298, where it is described as growing on Mount Ida at the scene of the Judgement of Paris.

The narcissus, νάρκισσος (*Narcissus tazetta*), grew at Colonus (*S. O.C.* 683). The other common variety found in Greece (*N. serotinus*) flowers in the autumn and is much smaller.

The crocus or saffron-plant, κρόκος (*Crocus sativus*), a purple variety of which the yellow stigmata were used for producing a dye, occurs in *A. Ag.* 239, where it is used in the description of a robe worn by Iphigeneia. On *S. Fr.* 451 the scholiast states that it was used in the worship of Demeter. It occurs in the description of Colonus (*S. O.C.* 685). There are several adjectives formed from κρόκος which mean yellow and occur frequently.

Ivy, κίσσος (*Hedera helix*), is often mentioned, especially by Euripides. It was much used for crowns and wreaths (*S. Tr.* 220; *E. Bacch.* 81, etc.). The thyrsus is described as κίσσινον βέλος (*ib.* 25), and Teiresias' staff was of ivy-wood (*ib.* 363). It was also used as a material for wooden cups (*E. Alc.* 756, *Cycl.* 151). It occurs in similes in virtue of its clinging nature (*S. Ant.* 826; *E. Med.* 1213, *Hec.* 398). The epithet κισσεύς is used of Apollo (*A. Fr.* 341) in the sense of ivy-crowned.

Rough bindweed, σμιλαξ (*Smilax aspera*), an evergreen climbing plant with white flowers which turn into red berries, occurs in *E. Bacch.* 108, 703, where it is used for garlands.

Christ's thorn, παλιούρος (*Paliurus australis*), is mentioned in *E. Cycl.* 394, where the Cyclops orders it to be used as fuel for the fire in which he is going to cook two of Odysseus' companions.

Mistletoe, ἱξός (*Loranthus Europaeus*), is mentioned in *E. Cycl.* 433 as an ingredient of bird-lime. The adjective ἱξοφόρος is found in *S. Fr.* 403 as an epithet of the oak.

Lichen, tree-moss (λειχήν), is not found in the Tragedians in its literal sense, but is twice used metaphorically by Aeschylus, of an eruption on the skin of animals (*Ch.* 281) and of a canker (*Eum.* 785).

Such are the trees, shrubs, and plants which occur in the surviving works of the three Greek tragic writers, and the contexts in which they are used. It will be seen that they are mentioned mainly in connexion with religious and funeral rites and articles of everyday use. They also

occur in similes and proverbial sayings and are frequently used in metaphorical senses.¹ They are hardly ever used to describe scenery and the beauties of nature.

Greek tragedy is concentrated on action, and the scene does not frequently change as in a modern play. No pains are taken to emphasize the background in front of which the action takes place. The ordinary scene is the front of a permanent building representing a temple or palace, which, though it may have been decked with foliage or garlands, does not suggest the beauties of nature. The scene, if laid elsewhere, for example on the uninhabited island of Lemnos in the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles or a rugged mountain in the *Prometheus Vincit* of Aeschylus, does not lend itself to picturesque description, but it is rather its desolation which is insisted upon. The messenger who so often appears and describes events which have occurred off stage is much too busy telling his story to dwell on the setting of the happenings which he has to relate. There is in fact only one passage in Greek tragedy where plant-life is introduced to give colour to a description of scenery namely the famous chorus in the *Oedipus Coloneus* of Sophocles in which he describes his own home, Colonus near Athens (*O.C.* 668 ff.), 'with its wine-dark ivy and the god's inviolate bower, rich in berries and fruit' and where 'the narcissus blooms with its fair clusters, ancient crown of the great goddesses, and the crocus with its golden beam', the home of 'the grey-leaved olive-tree, nurturer of children'.

But, as a rule, the Greek writers of the fifth century B.C., unless they had a special medicinal interest, as had Hippocrates, or an economic interest, like Herodotus, show little interest in plant-life. In the same way the Greeks only indulged in horticulture in order to obtain the necessities of life. The only gardens of which we hear are the sacred precincts of the gods, and no descriptions of gardens occur in Greek literature between those of Alcinoüs (Homer, *Od.* vii. 112 ff.) and of the Hesperides (Hesiod, *Theog.* 215 ff.), and the Greek novelists (e.g. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*, iv. 2). The way in which Greek writers (e.g. Xen. *Oec.* iv. 13 ff.) speak of the 'paradises' which the traveller saw in Persia shows that they had no such gardens in their own country.

The truth seems to be that the Greeks of the classical period, living in a beautiful, unspoiled country, took the beauties of nature as a matter of course and it seldom occurred to them to describe them; they did not see their fatherland being gradually defaced by the growth of huge towns and the encroachments of industrialism.

¹ It is remarkable how many botanical terms are used metaphorically in Greek tragedy, such as ἔρνος, ἄνθος, κλάδος, καρπός, σπέρμα, στάχυς, etc.